

Aaja Nach Lai [Come Dance] Performing and Practicing Identity among Punjabis in Canada

Nicola Mooney

Volume 30, numéro 1, 2008

Danse au Canada
Dance in Canada

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018837ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018837ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Mooney, N. (2008). *Aaja Nach Lai* [Come Dance]: Performing and Practicing Identity among Punjabis in Canada. *Ethnologies*, 30(1), 103–124.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/018837ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article traite des représentations de danses folkloriques du Punjabi : la bhangra et la giddha dans différents contextes canadiens. Après avoir introduit la notion d'identité punjabi, cet article offre une brève description des formes que revêtent ces danses, de leurs origines agraires et de leurs natures sexuées, ainsi que du type d'événements au cours desquels ces genres de danses sont performés chez les Punjabis canadiens, et plus spécifiquement les Jat Sikhs. Je défends l'idée que non seulement ces danses expriment et entretiennent l'identité punjabi dans des contextes diasporiques, mais également que ces identités font référence à un « imaginaire rural » jat qui se construit activement au travers de la danse et de la musique en réponse au phénomène de migration urbaine et transnationale. Cet imaginaire rural est usurpé par l'occidentalisation grandissante et la popularité croissante de la *bhang* dans la diaspora non jat du sud de l'Asie, ce qui remet en question le rôle crucial, le sens et l'identité jat.

AAJA NACH LAI [COME DANCE]

Performing and Practicing Identity among Punjabis in Canada

Nicola Mooney

University of the Fraser Valley

At Arjun's tenth birthday, celebrated in high style at a banquet hall, his elder female relatives put on an energetic giddha performance. Running around with his cousins in the hall's forecourt, he apparently wasn't that enthralled by their dancing, but his father and uncles seemed to enjoy seeing their wives and sisters-in-law in this traditional guise. Relying on the choreography skills of Arjun's cousin-sister's masi, Bindoo, whose team had won several college giddha competitions in India, the women had been planning their performance for a month, practicing several evenings a week, and carefully selecting their props and clothes. In contrast to the highly polished ensembles that they were wearing as party guests, looking like something out of a Bollywood film, their giddha outfits featured brightly coloured lehnga-cholis with often mismatched veils to accentuate their colour, and lots of tinsel finishes, as well as bold golden-coloured costume jewelry, hairpieces and bangles; their dupattas discretely veiling their heads, shoulders and breasts, they had taken off their elegant high-heeled shoes to dance barefoot. Standing and swaying in a circle, varying their claps to the beat of the CD being played across the speakers, they took turns to move forward in pairs to enact the scenes being sung in the boli — sisters exchanging secrets, daughters-in-law being scolded by their mothers-in-law, wives scolding their husbands for coming home drunk, winnowing and grinding grain. The performance over, the women dashed off to revert to their sophisticated selves in time for the cake-cutting ceremony and the posing for family photos, after which the DJ would play bhangra to open the dance floor, and all the guests would dance together. (Birthday Party, Brampton, Ontario, 2003)

I begin this article with an ethnographic vignette, based on my own participant-observation among Punjabis, and intersperse it with two more such accounts, in order to describe some of the performances contexts of Punjabi folk dance. Respectively the female and male forms of Punjabi folk dance, giddha and bhangra are performed at family and community celebrations, the most central of which are weddings, although their performance also continues to be linked to regional agrarian festivals in which the origins of these dances is purportedly found. Giddha and bhangra may also be performed, rather less spontaneously, in more publicly formalized contexts such as school annual days (in India), competitions (in India and abroad), and South Asian and multicultural festivals (in India, Canada, and elsewhere). While professional singers and troupes also perform folk dances, less practiced forms of giddha and bhangra nevertheless remain part of the everyday repertoires of being Punjabi. In each of these diverse performance contexts, giddha and bhangra can be linked to Punjabi identity.

This article suggests that Punjabis in Canada dance giddha and bhangra because they understand such performances as means of constructing and expressing some essential and authentic qualities of being Punjabi which may be of heightened importance in diasporic contexts. This suggestion itself is nothing new, as linkages between diasporic displacements and ethnic performances which seek to reconstitute and emplace identity are commonly witnessed in the multicultural milieu of contemporary Canada.¹ But I also argue that performances of giddha and bhangra, besides seeking to articulate and maintain Punjabi identity while simultaneously emplacing and rooting it in Canadian contexts, additionally refer to a rural imaginary that is actively and nostalgically constructed through dance and music in response to the deterritorializations of urban and transnational migration: reterritorialized in Canada, giddha and bhangra also seek to mark territory in Punjab, thus locating a utopian home there. In this sense, performing giddha and bhangra in Canada must be understood not in generalized diaspora terms (Clifford 1994) but rather as specific

-
1. While giddha and especially bhangra are frequently performed as part of Canadian heritage events, as well as in local community programming, and these types of performance are recognized to contribute to Punjabi-Canadian identities in particular ways, this article focuses on the non-formalized performances of dance found in the contexts of family and community celebrations.

manifestations of a unique experience of migration, displacement and reterritorialization, for as Gayatri Gopinath advises, bhangra "must be read as inhabiting multiple positions both *within* a particular local context and *across* local contests and the diasporic web of [cultural, political, historical, racial] identity it creates" (1995: 307).

In this study of identity and ethnic performance in Canada, the contexts of performance of these Punjabi folk dances are more significant than the dances themselves. As I am concerned here with the ways in which giddha and bhangra are deployed as strategic modes of creating Punjabi cultural meanings in diasporic Canadian contexts, the situations in which we find giddha and bhangra performances, and what Punjabis say about them as folk practices, are also important. The analysis of folk performance is necessarily multisited and intertextual: costume, music, dance, embodiment, drama, ritual, script, imagery, alternate representations (such as remixes and videos), potential for social commentary, and the multiple potential readings by performers and audiences must be considered. Music — as the necessary context for dance — is perhaps key, for as Gregory Dietrich argues, "it is especially true among diaspora communities that music is central to contexts and discourses in which cultural meaning is formulated and negotiated" (2004: 103-4). In diasporic circumstances, however, the relationships among Punjabi folk dance, its accompanying musical forms, and identity establish problems of community, authenticity and cultural continuance as diverse Canadian Punjabis and other diasporic South Asian dance to — and, contestationally, claim — both traditionalist and hybrid popular musical forms infused with Western pop influence and inflected with claims to a globalized modernity.

Punjab, Punjabyat, and Jats

Punjab is a region of northwestern South Asia which straddles the post-Partition Indo-Pakistani border; both India and Pakistan have present-day states called Punjab. On both sides of this border, Punjabis share a history and language, as well as numerous features of everyday life such as kinship structures, family values, and notions of gender, adherence to caste endogamy, folk practices and traditions, material and popular cultures, and a predominantly rural economy. Indeed, one of the central qualities of being Punjabi is being an autochthonous people, rooted in rural lands and agricultural lifeways. The notion of Punjabyat or a unified Punjabi culture recognizes and expresses these

regional commonalities, and with the exception of formal religious affiliations, the designation Punjabi articulates an ethnic category.

Music and performance, and particularly bhangra, may be interpreted as central features of Punjabinity (Gera 2005). Descriptions of Punjabi folk dances emphasize their rural character and their encapsulation of Punjabi traits. For instance:

The dances of Punjab are earthy and robust, just like its people. The land of five rivers... Punjab has given to India a race [sic] that is daring and noble. The Punjabis symbolize freedom of spirit and daredevilry. They regard dancing as their birthright, and their dances reflect this attitude of supreme confidence and conviviality. The people are capable of strenuous work, yet nothing seems to sap them of their infectious zest for life. They do nothing by halves. So they launch into their dances with swaggering gusto and overflowing energy. Bhangra gives this Indian state its very identity. Performed by men, this folk style has jumps, leaps, swirls, skips and hops — just about any physical feat that a virile son-of-the-soil can attempt. It is punctuated by a lot of acrobatics, meant to showcase daredevilry. Clapping, snapping of the fingers, and a recitation of boli [witty couplets] are its specialities. ... Gidda [sic] is the feminine riposte to Bhangra, no less colourful or vigorous (Khokar 2003: 19-20).

Despite this description's derivation in a lavishly-illustrated coffee-table collection on *Folk Dance*, it effectively summarizes what I have heard Punjabis themselves say about bhangra and its reflection of the uniqueness of their identity. A collection of similar provenance, *Folk Dance Traditions of India*, remarks that: "because of being the first post that had to face frequent invasions from the northwest, the people of the area have seen as many tragedies as victories. This has resulted in a psyche of 'living for the present' and 'living to the fullest'... The mood generated by the dance is that of infectious pulsating joie de vivre!" (Narayan 2004: 142-144). Similar descriptions of Punjabi exuberance and vivaciousness are also commonly found on a plethora of internet sites devoted to Punjabi culture, for instance, at www.lohrifestival.org. These generalizations about the boisterous and lively nature of Punjabi folk dances express not only its associations with the Punjab region, but also certain qualities and characteristics that are taken among Punjabis to be essential and primordial even while they are recognized to be essentialist and stereotypical. Performing bhangra and giddha maintains as well as reinvents Punjabi identity: these dances do not

simply mark a performer's Punjabi origins and ancestry, they also delineate important social and cultural traits of being Punjabi.

But despite broad similarities among Punjabis, and the idea of a common Punjabiyyat, the possibilities of Punjabi community are intersected and challenged by historical and post-colonial distinctions of religion, caste, nation, politics, and territory. In relation, particular local identities are constructed in which Muslim Pakistanis are differentiated from Hindu and Sikh Indians, Indian Hindus and Sikhs differentiate themselves from each other, and various Indian Punjabi caste communities (whether Hindu or Sikh) assert their further differences. Thus, although the claim to being Punjabi remains a link between Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims from greater Punjab, and despite the fact that many Punjabis claim an attachment to the common cultural identity expressed in Punjabiyyat, each community also attempts to demarcate its boundaries clearly. Among these various Punjabi communities, it is perhaps the Jat Sikhs that make the broadest and loudest claims to being at the heart of Punjabi traditions and thus the most Punjabi of Punjabis.

A caste of farmers and landlords with significant regional status, the Jat Sikhs embody the autochthonous Punjabi identity, but now frequently live urban and transnational lives. They nevertheless maintain and construct rural affiliations. In these landed attachments to the region, whether expressed in actively agricultural practices, emotive rural nostalgias, or religiously-nationalist Khalistani aspirations, Jats Sikhs² are symbolic of the region, and particularly of India's contemporary Punjab state. While Jats share in the commonalities of Punjabiyyat, their solidarities are also aware of colonial and national oppressions, notions of religious orthodoxy, linguistic issues, economic discriminations, agricultural development and underdevelopment, and perceptions of social marginalization (Mooney 2008). These challenges forge notions of common interest, shared identity, and ethnic solidarity among Jats (Jatpana) that firmly differentiate them from other Punjabis, and at the same time they heighten their assertions to being centrally representative of Punjabi identity. Not only do Jats most firmly claim bhangra as a source and an expression of their identity, but bhangra privileges Jats: "the jat [sic], and his female counterpart the jati [sic], are portrayed

2. Hereafter simply Jats, wherever religious identity is not primary; this accords with local usages.

through respectively stereotypical notions of male strength articulated with farming skills and youthful prowess and a feminine beauty that is ‘sharp’ in looks and allegedly unique to this caste” (Dudrah 2002: 376). It is on this Punjabi community, and particularly recent Jat immigrants to Canada and their bhangra performances, that this article is ethnographically focused.

Giddha, Bhangra, and Jat Identity

The afternoon before Daljit’s marriage, almost a hundred women dressed in some of their finest clothes descended on her parent’s home for the Ladies Sangeet. After admiring the intricate patterns of her freshly-applied henna, the women spent the afternoon singing boliyaan [couplets] and dancing in celebration of her impending nuptials. They began traditionally with five solemn songs lamenting Daljit’s departure from her natal family and home, their emotion perhaps heightened in recognition that she was to be married to a Sikh-Canadian groom, but the bittersweet nature of the occasion soon became obscured as the women began livelier performances. To honour Daljit, some of her younger cousin-sisters began with a few filmi songs — “Mehndi Lagaa Ke Rakhna” from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* was popular — but her village cousins and the older ladies soon joined forces in giddha. Sitting in a circle around Daljit, who struggled not to participate so as not to spoil her mehndi, the women clapped and sang together, while Daljit’s elder cousin-sister beat a dholaki. A lot of the boliyaan spoke fondly of Daljit’s relatives: the singers personalized the verses according to the relative’s traits wherever possible, so that they might dance in the centre of the circle when their verse was sung. Other songs provoked laughter as well as dance by poking fun at the groom’s family, especially at Daljit’s husband-to-be and his mother and father. Late in the afternoon, Daljit could no longer resist the rhythm, got to her feet, and began to clap and dance in the middle of the circle, prompting her relatives and well-wishers to stand about her, swaying and varying the beats of their claps. Daljit’s performance suggested bridal happiness as well as her mastery of the Malwai Jatti’s (a Jat woman of the Malwa region) folk repertoire. It reassured her elders — and perhaps herself — of her contentment at the match and her commitment to the gendered traditions of the community. (Ladies Sangeet, Moga, Punjab, 1999)

In everyday use, the terms giddha and bhangra typically refer to musical genres rather than forms of dance. Listening to music — or ‘watching it’ in association with music videos and films — is a common feature of daily Punjabi life, and visits to Punjabi homes in India and

Canada frequently find family members going about their household routines to a backbeat of televised or digitized bhangra. The reference to bhangra as a descriptor of Punjabi folklore approaches hegemony: the term has come to refer widely to all forms of Punjabi popular music, as well as, and not uncontentiously, to hybrid and diasporic forms which blend Punjabi song lyrics, the convention of call and response (*boliyaan*), and instrumentation with Western popular musical influences — including disco, reggae, house, hip-hop, and rap — in transnational contexts. Popular bhangra musicians and remix producers who are renowned for their crossover dance and youth appeal include Bally Sagoo, Jazzy B, DJ Sanj, Punjabi MC, Sukshinder Shinda, and Aman Hayer. Bhangra has recently achieved some success beyond Punjabi contexts. According to popular producer Rishi Rich — whose “music is at times more bling-bling than bhangra” — bhangra has become the “in thing” (Chaudhary 2003). In 2003, the Punjabi MC hit “Mundian Ton Bach Ke Rahi” was widely played among non-Punjabis in Europe and north America, and at the same time, bhangra influences were sampled in Western dance songs by Madonna, Britney Spears, and Missy Elliot among others; this popularity has contributed to the appropriation of bhangra as a minor fitness trend. Meanwhile, renowned Punjabi artists such as A.S. Kang, Kuldeep Manak, Gurdas Mann, Hans Raj Hans, Malkit Singh, Balwinder Safri, Manmohan Waris, Sarbjit Cheema, Harbhajan Mann, Balkar Sidhu, Kamal Heer, and the late Surjit Bindrakhia have continued to promote arguably more traditional and lyrically-meaningful bhangra recordings in transnational contexts.

Whatever their everyday associations with music, bhangra and giddha are the two main forms of Punjabi folk performance, and are related to the construction of Punjabi identity.³ They are described by Punjabis as lively forms of music and dance which contribute to an atmosphere of *mauj-masti* (fun and frolic). But these folk traditions are also charged with local meanings: for example, as the vignette at the opening of this section describes, the performance of giddha can be related to enactments of Punjabi notions of gender, kinship, and locality, and embodiments of regional discourses of authenticity, honour, tradition, and resistance. Giddha is traditionally performed as part of

3. While these traditional settings for folk performance are located in Punjab, and while the Punjabi-Canadian practice of these festivals may be altered, they nevertheless retain significance among Punjabis in Canada.

women's celebrations of weddings, as well as at the festivals of Lohri and Teej: the former January festival marks midwinter and the hope of a good harvest, while celebrating the marriage or birth of sons in the previous year; the latter August festival marks the rainy season, and the traditional annual return of newly-married girls to their natal villages. Bhangra is traditionally performed in conjunction with the festival of Baisakhi which celebrates the spring harvest in April. It is also widely performed as part of the wedding *baraat* [procession] as well as at other festive occasions such as the birth of sons. Bhangra is related to the articulation of masculine values: labour, industry and self-sufficiency in agriculture; loyalty, independence and bravery in personal, political and military endeavours; and the development and expression of virility, vigour, and honour are common themes. Giddha and bhangra are thus distinct performative genres: bhangra is the male version of Punjabi folk performance, while giddha is the female.⁴ Performed in public at weddings, bhangra and giddha would have been necessarily gendered forms of dance owing to the practice of *purdah* which separated women and men and limited women to the private sphere — as symbolized by their veils — so that they did not, traditionally, participate in the *baraat* and other public festivities. As we might expect of a patriarchal society, bhangra is the more ubiquitous and indeed even hegemonic term for Punjabi music and dance. According to Virinder Kalra: “giddha... has not seen the parallel development of modernized forms, but rather has been cannibalized by male Bhangra stars” (2000: 94). When Punjabis speak of dancing, they refer to bhangra (bhanga pauna, doing bhangra), and in dropping the term giddha whenever I am not referring to specifically female dance forms in this ongoing analysis, I utilize the common Punjabi terminology for popular and non-gender specific music and dance. In current usage, giddha refers only to a specifically female and formally performed genre of folk culture, while bhangra refers both to formal male performances of Punjabi folk dance, as well as to communal dancing of the dance floor variety among men and women. So, at Arjun's birthday party, described at the article's outset, while the women's giddha — which emphasized their skills in performing traditional gender roles as well as dance — was formally presented before an audience of guests, bhangra was danced commonly. However, we

4. I have commented elsewhere (Mooney 2003) on the import of viewing giddha as a pedagogical device connoting traditional gender roles and thus representing authentic Punjabi womanhood.

must note that this privileging of bhangra as the essential form of Punjabi folklore — and its cooptation of giddha — obscures the significance of giddha to women such as Daljit, and Arjun's elder female relatives, as well as the importance of giddha performance as a means of gendered identity production in the Punjabi community as a whole.⁵

While it is beyond the purview of the present article to explore the gendered distinctions between giddha and bhangra more fully, it is important to acknowledge that the apparent hegemony of bhangra in expressing Punjabiyat in the public consciousness reflects gender hierarchies and imbalances in the region as a whole. Giddha remains synonymous with familial and folk performances, and thus is part of the gendered paradigm which associates women with tradition (Mooney 2003). Bhangra, on the other hand, is charged — if not always replete — with modernity, whether in the ways it is instrumented, recorded and remixed, the linguistic forms and images deployed in its songs and videos, the transnational statuses of its lyricists, singers and performers, or the diasporic locations of its audience. The modernity of bhangra gives it national and transnational appeal among South Asians. As an instance, through narrative conceits which typically include bhangra performance, Bollywood and diasporic South Asian films position Punjabis as paragons of a frequently transnational Indian modernity, and relatedly, models of progress, status, and wealth, particularly in relation to weddings and other celebratory scenes which are enacted to bhangra songs: for instance, "Number One Punjabi" in *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke*, "Sona Sona" in *Major Saab*, "Aaja Nach Lai" in *Monsoon Wedding*, and "Punjabiyan di Shaan Vakhri" in *Bend It Like Beckham*. Given the popular impulse to claim bhangra and appropriate it to speak generally for modern Indian values and secular and globalized South Asian identities, and because Punjabiyat and especially Jatpana proceed in part from perceptions of marginalization within the Indian nation, bhangra must be firmly differentiated from the forms of Hindi

5. Although this everyday usage is well-established within the community, these terms may more properly reference the type of performance than the gender of the performer. For instance, Malwai giddha, giddha of the Malwa region, is a form of Punjabi folk dance performed by men, who like women performing giddha, call out bolis to each other in pairs, and utilizing a wooden clapper instrument known as a chhikka sapp that itself, I have been told, is called a giddha in this instance; however, to perhaps gender this observation, Malwai giddha is also described as a kind of bhangra.

pop and Bollywood film music with which it is frequently conflated by both the Mumbai music industry — which seeks to profit from the fashionable status of Punjabi music — and South Asians at large.

Bhangra is thus an increasingly complex and inspecific term which refers not only to folk forms of Punjabi music and Bollywood adaptations, but also to the hybrid and remixed forms popular with South Asian or desi youth (Dietrich 2004, Maira 1998 and 2002), as well as to what is sometimes disparagingly called “Punjabi pop”. These are syncretic and pastiche forms of culture: for instance, Gayatri Gopinath describes how DJ Bally Sagoo “mixes traditional Sufi devotional songs, Hindi film music, roots bhangra, or Punjabi folk songs ... with techno, rap, reggae, and particularly dancehall”, thus rendering audible “the impossibility of a coherent, stable, fixed identity by constantly referencing their own instability and constructedness, through the appropriation of various musical idioms and allusions to points outside this coherent self” (1995: 312). Despite their threat to an authentic Punjabi folk genre (Pande 1999), modern and diasporic influences on Punjabi folk culture are increasingly pervasive. The hybrid musical forms that comprise British and other forms of diaspora bhangra contribute particularly to youthful and subcultural South Asian identity formations (Dietrich 2004; Dudrah 2002; Maira 1998 and 2002; Warwick 2000). Depending on the sociocultural position of the participant or performer, however, bhangra may be located variously within an affirmative and empowering (Dudrah 2002) third space (Bhabha 1994) or third culture (Warwick 2000) which is about being Punjabi and South Asian in diaspora, or within a Jat-centric discourse that claims bhangra as a reassuring yet endangered source of tradition and emplacement in contexts of migration and displacement.

Punjabi immigrants to Canada experience bhangra, and make assessments of its suitability to performance and thus identity purposes, according to these criteria. Jats are particularly careful to bind their identities through careful selection of the music to which they will dance. In more than a decade of attending various Jat celebrations, I have yet to hear a DJ play bhangra (or Hindi) songs produced for the film industry when the dance floor is open, or to witness Jats dancing at community events to such recordings. Kuldeep, a Jat living in Brampton, explained the importance of dancing to bhangra at family and community celebrations in the following way:

It's like this. As you know we are Jats. So Punjabi is our mother tongue. I mean we know Hindi, and we listen to Hindi songs and watch Hindi movies. But it is not our language. When I speak Hindi it comes out as if my mum tried to speak English. One word will be Hindi and the rest Punjabi. So the music should be in our language. It should be our music. And also, our music has the dhol, the beat. Hindi music does not have this. You can't do bhangra to it. Of course it has some nice romantic nature and you might like to sit and listen to it. But it's not the same at all as dancing to our music. It doesn't come naturally.

Bhangra is thus understood, practiced and represented as a primordially Jat phenomenon, related to both language and beat, as well as to the organic embodiment of Jat identity in its performance. While the Hindi forms of folk and popular culture that are otherwise dominant in South Asia may be passively consumed and appreciated among Jats, bhangra permits Kuldeep and others the active practice of and participation in Punjabi and especially Jat identities.

The most popular form of bhangra among Indian and first generation Canadian Jat Sikhs like Kuldeep is what has been called "roots bhangra" (Gopinath 1995: 312). In keeping with its originary location as a rural genre, roots or traditionalist bhangra, like other forms of Punjabi language and folklore, might be perceived as a comparatively uncomplicated musical form and performance style. Although produced in studios, this form is recognizeably traditional in its use of regional forms of instrumentation and typical lyrical themes. Journalist Jane Armstrong reports that Punjabi Jagg Batth told her, "with a laugh", that "there are only a handful of themes in Punjabi music...girls, lost love and good times. Oh, and missing the Punjab" (Armstrong 2005). Frequent thematics for bhangra lyrics include identity, heritage, and pride, including rural imageries and nostalgia; friendship and loyalty; love, courtship, marriage, and kinship; and, more infrequently, social problems such as alcoholism and dowry. As well, popular lyrical subtraditions within bhangra detail the characteristics of the Punjabi and Jat communities, and the prized traits of their women and men. For instance, the song "Putt Jattan De", describes the titular "sons of the Jats" as exuberant, proud, brave, and loyal, all exceedingly, and indeed to the point of death; this song, derived from a Punjabi film of the same name, was remixed in the 1990s and has retained since then an immense popularity at Jat Sikh events.

This apparently simple connection between music, dance, and the expression of identity is not, however, uncontentious. Roots bhangra is the primary source of sampled hybrid forms that, while popular as a whole, have problematic meanings for Jats. As well, the regionally specific meanings of roots bhangra become obscured when it is consumed and performed by other South Asians. Anjali Gera has suggested that bhangra is “more dance, naach than song, geet” (2004b: 2). She argues that this apparent subordination of lyrics to dance contributes to the popularity of bhangra as a non-Punjabi South Asian and indeed a global form of music: the inclusion of what Gera calls “nonsense syllables like shava shava, balle balle, chak lai patthe [sic], oye hoye, more sounds than meaning” facilitate “participation in Bhangra without having to know a word of Punjabi” (Gera 2004b: 9). But these musical forms, as Gera herself remarks, are characteristic of vilayetibhangra [foreign or overseas bhangra] and thus its diasporic hybrid form. It is also true that some of the “nonsense syllables” to which Gera refers have profoundly agricultural meanings: *chak de phatte*, used colloquially as an invitation to exuberance, also means to open the sluice gate and let the irrigation water flow. Based on my understanding of Punjabi and especially Jat appreciations of particularly poetic, emotive, nostalgic, or historically-meaningful traditionalist bhangra songs, I would assert that whatever readings of the genre occur beyond the Punjabi community, and despite the importance among Punjabis and others of being able to dance to it, lyrics establish hierarchies of music such that nonsense syllabics are viewed with consternation from within. Most Jats, for instance, shun the bhangra of Daler Mehndi which is renowned for nonsense syllables, as well as for its “Hindification”. As Kuldeep’s remarks indicated, Hindi is considered unsuited to bhangra. Jats privilege listening and dancing to bhangra which they feel is representative of their identity, whether in its traditional style and instrumentation, its lyrical content, or in its being performed by other Jats.

Performing Dance and Practicing Identity

Kamal and Pinoo’s wedding was the fulfillment of a long-harboured dream. A love marriage across castes, their families had opposed the marriage for a number of years. To entertain their guests — from Malaysia, England (via Africa), and the United States — in lavish Punjabi abandon, as well as to demonstrate to their families their appreciation for these traditions despite their unconventional

marriage, they arranged for several traditional performances to accompany the wedding events. Two dhol players performed on the evening before the wedding, first at Kamal's house in Scarborough, and then at Pinoo's parents' house in Brampton; these same drummers played for the *baraat* at the gurdwara in the morning, and in the evening, they drummed the entrance of Kamal and Pinoo into the banquet hall. A charming performance was then given by three of Kamal's teenaged cousins who had been enrolled in *giddha* and Bollywood dance lessons since childhood. But just before the dance floor was opened to the guests came the most spectacular and energetic performance, which was provided by a *bhangra* troupe, six young men outfitted in crisp white *kurtas* and bright red satin *lunghis*, vests and turbans, barefoot and arms in the air, timing their hand and feet movements to perfection, and using *chimte*, *sotti*, *giddha* (various percussion instruments), and a number of other traditional props. They danced to a medley of traditional *bhangra* songs, and then, against an exploding curtain of sparkler special effects, to a current hit by UK *bhangra* group B21. The climax of the performance came when Kamal enthusiastically and masterfully leapt from the bridal platform to dance among them, exuberant at having arranged not only the wedding but also the marriage of his dreams. (Wedding, Toronto, Ontario, 2002)

The common hallmark of *bhangra* is its danceability. Its primary foci are rhythm, tempo and beat; *bhangra* thus uses characteristic instruments which focus on percussion. Traditionally, the central instrument is the *dhol*, a two-headed bass drum played with sticks; centred on the beat of the *dhol* are the *toombi*, a gourd instrument with a single string that is plucked, and the *chimta*, a pair of tongs with flat bells attached that are shaken to produce a sound akin to *tambourine*⁶. Such is the importance of pace and tempo in *bhangra* that the most frequent resemblance between contemporary and traditional forms is that of rhythm. While drum machines may have replaced *dhols*, and synthesizers now imitate a range of Punjabi instruments, and while DJs may have electronically manipulated the music, added samples from Western pop, and with increasing frequency even English-language lyrics and rap, the essential characteristic of the *dhol*'s lively beat is unaltered. As Kuldeep's remarks indicate, it is *bhangra*'s drumbeat that renders it essential to the creation of identity through dance. The characteristic beat is the source of the primordial

6. In contrast, the beat is kept in traditional *giddha* only by handclapping among the performers; *giddha* has no instrumentation other than the occasional percussive use of a *dholaki* (small drum) or *matka* (earthenware pot).

and embodied identity that is possible when dancing bhangra, and the importance of this embodiment in diasporic contexts is obvious.

While Western understandings of dance may emphasize self-expression, dancing bhangra relies on characteristic movements which are shared among, and unique to, Punjabis. Arms are typically held aloft, hands and shoulders move with the beat, and one foot is placed in front of the other while the weight is shifted back and forth on the feet. Dancers may move collectively in a circle, encircling a pair or more of feature dancers who take turns in being enabled to move more freely and thus showcase their skill with a broader variety of movements. Bhangra may be accompanied by vocalizations of such stock phrases of collective merriment and exuberance as “*oh balle*”, “*balle balle*” (hurray!), “*chak de phatte*” (colloquially akin to “kick butt!” or “rip up the floorboards”), and “*brroooah*” (sound imitating a goat; this vocalization is known as *bakre bulaonde*, to speak like a goat). While hand and arm movements are key and apparently easily duplicated — I have heard Punjabis on several occasions jokingly explain that to do bhangra one simply has to pretend they are screwing in an overhead lightbulb — lower body movements, such as circling, reversing, and spinning to particular beats and sub-beats are essential to the demonstration of skill in bhangra, and key to the ability to move in a circular fashion with other dancers. Jats may prefer to perform bhangra in bare feet, which suggests the ability of bhangra to ground or root the identity it performs.

It is significant to group identity that bhangra is not performed individually. Gera suggests that the stylized, ritual movements of “the dancing bhangra body” (2005: 2) create the possibility of “an [otherwise] elusive unifying moment in which a shared punjabiyat [sic] might be performed” (10). While this is a compelling argument for Jats, even in diaspora, the unification of the collective Jat body is rarely elided, nor are traumatic and marginalizing memories of insults to Jatpana amid the fractures and fragmentations of post-colonial Punjabiyat. Rather, the embodied identities created and occupied in Jat experiences of dance and music are exclusive: Jat claims to centrality in Punjabi historical and cultural contexts, and amid political marginalization, are of far greater concern than a regional unity which does not privilege Jats. These concerns are firmly applied to the distinctions (Bourdieu 1979) developed and practiced by Jats in relation to bhangra, many of which articulate autochthony and embody authenticity amid the transitions and challenges of modernity and diaspora.

Modern identities must be continuously made and re-made amid the constant motion of people in diaspora — Arjun Appadurai's "ethnoscape" (1996) — and set against the movements of capital, commodities, technologies, media and ideas in globalization. Whether living in India or transnationally, Punjabis are enmeshed in the "global flows" (Hannerz 1992) of capital, goods, technologies and media that are characteristic of modern life (Appadurai 1996; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). Punjabiyyat and Jatpana are embedded in broad discourses of fixity and movement, origin and destination, territoriality and deterritorialization, roots and routes, global and local (Appadurai 1996, Clifford 1994, Grewal 1996, Lavie and Swedenburg 1996, Lovell 1998, Meyer and Geschiere 1999, Rapport and Dawson 1998). In diaspora, relationships between places and identities are transformed as homes old and new become sites for everyday practices, enactments, embodiments, performances, and discourses which attach identities to places (Bahloul 1996, Lovell 1998; Rapport and Dawson 1998). As the case of Kamal and Pinoo's wedding demonstrates, performing bhangra as a demonstration of respect and mastery of the traditions of home against the new social impulses of diaspora, is a mediation of the flows, closures and multiply-located meanings of diaspora. In relation, the processes and effects of transnationalism do not entail the "dissolution" of "homogeneous, discrete and tightly bounded" cultures (Levin 2002: 7), for the ethnographic "subjects" of diaspora often regard themselves as culturally essential, primordial, and frequently landed entities (Clifford 1994; Fog Olwig and Hastrup 1997; Lovell 1998). Globalized movement reinforces cultural difference (Appadurai 1999; Meyer and Geschiere 1998), as "there is much empirical evidence that people's awareness of being involved in open-ended global flows seems to trigger a search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well as determined efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries" (Meyer and Geschiere 1999: 2).

Practicing identity contextually through differentially privileged performances of bhangra, Jats bound themselves from non-Jat Sikh Punjabis, non-Punjabi Indians (and Pakistanis), and other diasporic South Asians. At the same time, dancing bhangra in ritualized contexts and experiencing the genre as a means of connection to other Jats — and indeed other Punjabis — in a global linguistic community and body of movement constitutes identity through spontaneous and normative notions of *communitas* (Turner 1979: 45-7) and thus the

collective experience, representation, ritualization and practice of community. The “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie 1991) of the Punjabi diaspora are places in which Punjabi notions of identity, belonging, and emplacement are continually inscribed and reinscribed against contexts of transnational movement and histories of frequently violent displacement which may be perceived as caste-specific. Bhangra performance is a means not only of constructing identity, but also of attempting to reconcile crises of “disharmonic social process[es]” (Turner 1979: 63), whether the history of Partition, post-colonial marginalizations, or modern and diasporic displacements. As well, Dietrich has noted that music both unites and empowers members of diaspora communities in its shared sonic imagining of the homeland, creating a unique “cultural space” (2004: 104) in which cultural difference is asserted. Gera has suggested that a new Punjabiyyat is reconstructed in conjunction with contemporary revivalist and hybrid bhangras; this “Bhangra Nation” restores Punjab in the imagination of diverse Sikh, Hindu and Muslim Punjabis to a pre-Partition agrarian whole, “an essentialized punjabiyyat [sic] captured in the trope of return” (2005: 5). Such a myth of return “stands in contrast to the perceived dystopia in which actual life is lived” in diaspora (Safran 1991: 94). For Jats, this dystopia is not merely diasporic, but also results from historical experiences and collective memories — of losses of life, land, and power against the political and social divisions of post-independence India — which enforce boundaries from other Punjabis and Indians, and in themselves encourage migratory displacements. Recently-migrant Jats are embedded as much in the painful moment of departure as in the utopian hope of return, and, relatedly, attempt to construct cohesive, singular, authentic, primordial — and in acts of nostalgic self-preservation, reassuring and comfortable — identities for themselves. The popularity of modern, mediated bhangra performances beyond Punjabi contexts must thus be interpreted both in terms of their deserved significance as a lively musical and dance style and as representations of the possibility of a globalized Punjabi modernity, as well as their threat to authentic and appropriate articulations of Punjabi tradition and particularly Jat centrality.

Both the Jat experience of diaspora, where Punjabi often becomes a non-dominant cultural and linguistic mode and the diasporic transformations of bhangra to a less-Punjabi genre are problematic, and bhangra itself must be reclaimed against these appropriations and

intrusions. Dietrich argues that "although it has a special resonance for Punjabis", owing to its "driving rhythms", bhangra "has become an emblem of pan-Indian identity and tradition to which a wide range of [diasporic South Asians] in different locales respond" (2004: 109). As well, Dietrich notes that South Asians from other regions of India are reluctant to secularize even popular forms of music and dance owing to their originary performance in religious contexts, while "secular bhangra... [is] viewed as intrinsically closer to the party ethos" (2004: 109). While Jats are only too happy to extol the exuberance of bhangra, such an interpretation appropriates bhangra as part of a decultured script for Indian and diasporic South Asian modernity, thus reinforcing Jat marginalizations in the context of India as nation. It also may misrepresent the sacrality of bhangra as an identity text. Punjabi vocalists (such as Malkit Singh, Sukshinder Shinda, and even the decried Daler Mehndi) frequently attribute their success to having been raised in religious households in which kirtan and recitations of the Guru Granth Sahib were performed. Malkit Singh told reporter Nona Walia that "I used to be a raagi in a gurudwara, classical training in kirtan gave me immense confidence" (Walia: 2004). Bhangra has other potentially spiritual connections, not the least of which is its power to signify the uniquely Sikh nature of community, identity, and history, but these linkages are under-explored and there is at large a generalized under-appreciation of them. However, the presumption that bhangra might not be encoded with such meanings is a troubling one. The Jat rejoinder to such usurpations is to claim ownership of and assert control over bhangra.

This is most readily done through the privileging of rural origins: bhangra, like Jats, is inherently agrarian, and this essential feature of identity is reproduced through a nostalgic discourse and active practice that I have elsewhere described as a "rural imaginary" (Mooney 2008). A continuous imagining, Jat rurality is expressed and reinforced by the maintenance of socioeconomic links to land, visits to village homes, as well as in speech, diet, dress, music, film and ritual. There is also a profound inextricability of Jat agricultural and Sikh religious identities. As the originary reference point for the articulation of the rural imaginary is leaving the land — and thus one's traditional caste identity as a Jat — urban Jats in India as well as globally diasporic Jats manifest and participate in the rural imaginary, which simultaneously marks modern separations from land and rural tradition and the reconstruction of a

unique, landed and rural Jat identity. The rural imaginary attempts an imaginative, nostalgic and utopian Jat reterritorialization of Punjab, and bhangra, as a genre of folk performance derived from agrarian contexts, is a key site for the redeployment of Jat identity. Dancing bhangra, Jats in Canada mark originary homes and lands in Punjab, as well as the continuous coherence of their identities in diasporic contexts. This identity, contingent on rural homes and lands and embodied in the Jat experience of migration, deterritorialization and emplacement, is reconstituted and expressed through the performance of bhangra.

The rural imaginary is at odds, however, with new bhangra forms which are proliferating in diaspora. While proponents of the creative cultural potential of hybrid bhangra forms argue that “to many members of the third culture, hybridized remixes represent the future of bhangra” (Warwick 2000: 41), “a vehicle via which young Asians of differing religious and cultural backgrounds are able to overcome their own particular differences thus forging a common form of identity in order to symbolically counteract the marginalization, exclusion and hostility to which they are often subject” (Bennett 1997:108), and while “it is possible ... to consider that the music listened to by South Asian teens in Toronto suburbs is part of a continuum that began in the fields of Punjab hundreds of years ago”, many Punjabis find it difficult to recognize that contemporary bhangra forms “are related to [their] traditional music” (Warwick 2000: 26). Among Jats, such forms may be perceived as inauthentic, and destructive of traditional identities. Moreover, while Jats might dance with some enthusiasm to the hyper-exaggerated beats of modern hybrid bhangra, they most clearly interpret in the growing popularity of bhangra as a whole a revival of rightful claims to Jat centrality in Punjab and India. As well, when they are not carried away by the beat, they perceive challenges to the authenticity and tradition of their identity in such Westernized, mediated, and commercialized forms of music and performance. Dancing bhangra becomes the proverbial double-edged sword, and traditionalist, roots forms of the genre are therefore clearly preferred. As expressions of the rural imaginary, such forms comment on the dislocating and disempowering experiences of post-colonialism, modernity, and diaspora, for “collectively performed images may be ... commentaries on other domains of culture” (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996: 240).

Bhangra — and giddha — performances have the power to create and sustain identities against these challenges. In the giddha

performances at Daljit's marriage, traditional gender norms and marital expectations were practiced and resisted, and links to natal kin, village traditions, and Punjabi homes were celebrated, partly in expectation that these might be sustained after Daljit's emigration. At Arjun's birthday, his newly-Canadian female elders demonstrated their expertise in traditional performance forms and gender roles, as well as their comfort with transnational modernity, in performing both giddha and bhangra. Meanwhile, at Kamal and Pinoo's wedding, the bhangra performances marked reconstructions and continuities of culture against modern and diasporic social change by reiterating the importance of Punjabi traditions in Canadian contexts. In each of these instances, the various dance performances were grounded in rural imageries and scripts, conjuring — momentarily at least — a pristine and timeless autochthony despite their venues. For Jats, dancing bhangra is not simply about moving one's body to the compelling beat of a locally-meaningful folk tradition gone global; it is a strategy of emplacement, empowerment and embodiment, affirming traditional and primordial identities in situations of modernity and migration, constructing an authentic and landed Jatpana against contexts of deterritorialization and the challenges of cultural appropriation, and charging a rural imaginary with the meaningful continuance of a coherent Jat self. Dancing bhangra creates everyday returns to rurality, marking originary homes and lands in Punjab, re-embedding people and performance, Jats and bhangra, in authentic and empowered positions. After all, dance is a uniquely grounding performative genre — the feet leave but are always returned to the earth.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1999. "Dead Certainty: Ethnic violence in the Era of Globalization". In *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and closure*, eds., Birgit Meyer and Peter Gesshire, pp. 305-324. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Armstrong, Jane. 2005. "Pop music's new beat is the sound of Surrey". *Globe and Mail*. February 15.
- Axel, Brian Keith. 2002. "The Diasporic Imaginary". *Public Culture* 14(2): 411-428.
- Bahloul, Joelle. 1996. *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria, 1937-1962*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett, Andrew. 1997. "Bhangra in Newcastle: Music, Ethnic Identity and the Role of Local Knowledge". *Innovations* 10(1): 107-116.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1979. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Chaudhary, Vivek. 2003. "The Big Bhangra". *The Guardian*. August 15.
- Clifford, James. 1994. "Diasporas". *Cultural Anthropology*. 9(3): 302-338.
- Dietrich, Gregory. 2004. "Dancing the Diaspora: Indian Desi Music in Chicago". In Thomas Turino and James Lea, eds. *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*: 103-116. Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press.
- Dudrah, Rajinder K. 2002. "Drum'n'dhol: British Bhangra Music and Diasporic South Asian Identity Formation". *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5(3): 363-383.
- Fog Olwig, Karen and Kirsten Hastrup, eds. 1997. *Siting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object*. London: Routledge.
- Gera, Anjali. 2004a. "Bhangra Nation". <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/mai/Bhangra.doc>
- . 2004b. "Punjabiyaan di shaan wakhri" www.arts.monash.edu.au/mai/EthnicReturns.doc
- . 2005. "Folk's Kool Turn". Paper given at M.B.Emeneau Centenary International Conference on South Asian Linguistics. http://www.ciil.org/announcement/MBE_programme/paper/paper9.htm

- Gopinath, Gayatri. 1995. "Bombay, U.K., Yuba City: Bhangra Music and the Engendering of Diaspora". *Diaspora* 4(3): 303-322.
- Grewal, Inderpal. 1996. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 1992. *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kalra, Virinder S. 2000. "Vilayeti Rhythms: Beyond Bhagra's Emblematic Status to a Translation of Lyrical Texts". *Theory, Culture and Society* 17(3):80-102
- Khokar, Ashish Mohan. 2003. *Folk Dance: Tribal, Ritual and Martial Forms*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.
- Lavie, Smadar and Ted Swedenburg, eds. 1996. *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Levin, Michael. 2002. "Flow and Place: Transnationalism in Four Places". *Anthropologica* XLIV(1): 3-12.
- Lovell, Nadia, ed. 1998. *Locality and Belonging*. London: Routledge.
- Maira, Sunaina. 1998. "Desis Reprazent: Bhangra Remix and Hip Hop in New York City" *Postcolonial Studies* 1(3): 357-70.
- . 2002. *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Meyer, Birgit and Peter Geschiere, eds. 1999. *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Mooney, Nicola. 2003. *Good Families, Good Fortunes: Ethnicity and Modernity Among an Urban Jat Sikh Middle Class*. Unpublished dissertation, Toronto.
- . 2008. *Rural Nostalgias and Transnational Dreams: Identity and Modernity among Jat Sikhs*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press (Forthcoming).
- Narayan, Shovana. 2004. *Folk Dance Traditions of India*. Gurgaon: Shubhi Publication.
- Palmer, Gary B. and William R. Jankowiak. 1996. "Performance and Imagination: Towards an Anthropology of the Spectacular and the Mundane". *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (2): 225-258.
- Pande, Alka. 1999. *From Mustard Fields to Disco Lights: Folk Music and Musical Instruments of Punjab*. Middletown, NJ: Granta.
- Rapport, Nigel and Andrew Dawson, eds. 1998. *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement*. London: Berg.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1991. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta.
- Safran, William. 1991. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return". *Diaspora* Spring: 83-99.

- Turner, Victor. 1979. *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Walia, Nona. 2004. "Bhangra Pop: Roll Over Salsa, Here Comes Khalsa". *Times of India*. September 4.
- Warwick, Jacqueline. 2000. "Make Way for the Indian: Bhangra Music and South Asian Presence in Toronto". *Popular Music and Society* 24(2): 25-44.